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## The Hat Lady Equation

Lauren Capone

University of New Orleans, [lecapone@uno.edu](mailto:lecapone@uno.edu)

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# The Hat Lady Equation

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Poetry

by

Lauren Capone

B.A. College of Charleston, 2009

May 2014

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for Mom, Dad  
Erin, Blaine, Megan  
and Ray

I am grateful for the help of many people, a few of whom I will mention here: my mom and dad whose love and constancy thread me together and who showed me how to cultivate adventure and home. For my brother and sisters whose friendship remains my center. Carol Ann Davis and Paul Allen who helped me find my way into writing. Carolyn Hembree, Randy Bates, Nancy Easterlin, and John Gery who patiently work with me to shape that life. Ray who's forever by my side.

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## Preface

... this business of becoming conscious, of being a writer,  
is ultimately about asking yourself, how alive am I willing to be.

– Anne Lamott

Poetry allows me inquisitiveness. It functions partly as an avenue for me to pick apart something of interest until, as a result of disassembling and discovering its components, I better understand the subject. Understanding fosters compassion. I hope the questions and reflection that the poems provoke for me are passed along to the reader.

My curiosity started at the ocean. Beginning with a fearful fascination for sharks, my interest in oceanic organisms has grown to include the tiniest zooplankton filtered by the largest baleen whales. My connection with the strange life-giving aspects of the open water is underlined by my being from New Orleans and by my familial connection to the fishing community here. For years I thought I'd study to become a marine biologist. The colorful unknowns, the otherworldiness of the oceans, and the imagination that those characteristics fostered provoked me. The prevalence of sea creatures in my manuscript manifests that appreciation, but signifies something larger. The undersea creatures not only represent my curiosity, but writing allows me to extend that fascination from the oceans to the whole experience of life.

Considering fish and poetry, Elizabeth Bishop exerts a strong influence on me as a poet. Through reading Bishop, I learned the value of details and noted how she re-imagines the world through subtle observations. Bishop was prompted by the misprint of “mammoth” in the newspaper to write “The Man-Moth.” In the poem, Bishop depicts the world through the eyes of “Man-Moth”: “the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky.” The imagined perspective of a creature designed from a seemingly insignificant detail (the misprint) is central to a poem that speaks to greater concerns of humanity. Like Bishop, I use details from my daily experience to

initiate poems. In “Becoming a Saint” I used the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI to imagine a woman reigning as Pope Poetess.

Everything in life is viable material for a poem—from the mundane, to the domestic, to pop culture, to the sacred, to the horrific. Each day, through observation and participation, I develop a muscle for constant note-taking—it’s a muscle that with practice, remains active regardless of my situation at the time. The collection of material for poems continues to be one of the most enjoyable aspects of making a poem. While I’m watching a David Attenborough documentary about the migration of whales, or while I’m on a walk with my nephew watching cars and listening to his utterances, or while I’m listening to the radio or conversations between people in line at the grocery—all are rich with material. From this material I generate a poem. I look for connections between the observations I record or my experiences, then begin piecing the work together. This, the making of the poem, is most intriguing to me, more so than the finished poem. I like to do the work. Once I’m finished working on a poem, my hope is that it will be available to others who are willing to work on it, and find a place for it in their lives (even if only for an instant). I write poems in one of a few ways:

Starting with my notes, I add as much material to the poem as I can. In the first several drafts I like the poem to be thick, heavy, and unwieldy. At the beginning stages of any poem, there are few definite structural aspects—even punctuation remains on the periphery. Then I home in on the structure of the poem—a process that involves reading the poem aloud, hanging the poem by the kitchen sink, and chance operations such as erasure or cutting the poem into parts and pasting the parts together randomly. I use chance operations because these methods generate connections between words and phrases that I wouldn’t ordinarily put together. Often such operations reveal unforeseen relationships at work in the poem. During the process I’m unsure of the end result. Alberto Giacometti said “You have to do something by undoing it. . . . You have to dare to



give the final brush stroke that makes everything disappear.” I put the poem through every situation I can imagine (redacting, moving stanzas or lines around, trying different forms) and see what survives. I use sound, language, syntax, and associations to guide me. Some of the associations are recognizable for many readers while others are personal to my experience. With the latter I am aware that I risk losing readers, but I strive to put enough details in the poem to ground the reader, encouraging him/her to continue.

At other times I start from a specific experience. However, as is true in the previous method, I seldom aim for a specific end-result or keep to a defined narrative. Sometimes narrative limits my poems. In part I write to discover what’s beyond the narrative. Gaston Bachelard calls this “non-knowing” in his introduction to *Poetics of Space*: “Knowing must therefore be accompanied by an equal capacity to forget knowing. Non-knowing is not a form of ignorance but a difficult transcendence of knowledge” (xxxii). By allowing the narrative to break into something unknown, I give space for fresh perspectives on an otherwise understood situation or feeling. “In Which I Dismantle My Body,” a poem that lived in my thoughts for years, executes this discovery. Originally, I considered this poem to be central to my understanding of the dichotomy of spirit and body, emphasizing the significance of the body as a vessel. “In Which I Dismantle My Body” describes the way I (a spirit or what survives death) take apart the pieces of my dead body near a body of water. While this activity raises questions about the afterlife, the poem insists on another question: “Does it matter which body of water?” Initially I thought the poem concerned only the body/spirit complex, but the writing process extended into surprising territory when it uncovered the question of place. As the poetic material developed in my mind, the thoughts centered on the dismantling of my body after death. However, several drafts into the writing stage when I hammered out the physical details in the poem, I didn’t have a name for the water. As the question surfaced in the drafts, I began to realize that water has played a major role in my life. I grew up in

New Orleans surrounded by water, moved to Charleston, SC (also surrounded by water), then returned to New Orleans. My husband is searching for a job and there's uncertainty as to where we may end up living; however, I feel myself being pulled to this city: Could the water be the Mississippi? Does it matter—could I be content anywhere?

A preoccupation with visual arts pervades my manuscript. My interest in the visual arts stems from my own work in visual arts and from a passed-on appreciation of visual arts from my dad, an art enthusiast, and my brother, a painter. I connect with artists working in different mediums through the process of creating. While language serves primarily for communication in our everyday lives, visual stimulation also sustains common shared associations. It can be difficult to challenge these ingrained associations, but as a poet I find it exciting to expand past the boundaries of common language usage. For instance, elision offers concision, syntax play can give a wandering or a fragmented pace to the poem, and the use of a variety of voices offers a dynamic texture. John Berryman's *Dream Songs* influence my experimentation with syntax and with voices. "The Hat Lady Equation" employs elision: "With April came the thought of dead/and tarnished." Because the noun is omitted, the significance is placed on what it means to be "dead" and "tarnished." Additionally because there is no specified object, the phrase evokes an array of visualization. The following sentence exemplifies inverted syntax: "Never it sank, the changeless thought." offering a different perspective and rhythm for the sentence. Deconstruction is fundamental to my understanding of the way something works and encourages a range of perspectives.

Ekphrastic poetry, as defined by John Drury in *The Poetry Dictionary*, "imitates, describes, critiques, dramatizes, reflects upon or otherwise responds to a work of nonliterary art" (84). "*Joe Harper's Fort Across the River*," in addition to describing visual aspects of the painting, imagines a

narrative for the painting. “Schwimmender Kopf” developed in response to Chris Dennis’ series of paintings *Please Be Quiet, Please*. The poem takes aspects of the paintings (that the paint buckled, that the colors bled) and reinterprets the information to describe algae on the body of a sunfish (pertinent, too, because each painting includes a fish head). With this poem, I turned to research, as I do in many of my poems, because, again, it allows me to break from what I know. Some of the paint splotches look like blackberries, but I needed a different language for the blackberries and for the paint; I wanted to know more about blackberries. Through research I found that an aggregate of drupelets comprise a single blackberry. The idea of several things comprising a whole led me to think of people working and feeling together: “Each of us alone / what we are longing as one. // Look closely, an aggregate of purple-black / a blackberry makes.” In this instance I incorporated the research into my poem to add more depth to the descriptive verse. My resources include my collection of books and the internet (podcasts, youtube videos, articles), though I sometimes reach out to a person or require additional material from the library. The research functions in a few ways: it gives me a break from working on the page, adds new language for the poem, and stimulates my understanding of the subject. I’m always interested to discover any connections of which I might have otherwise been unaware. The research process emphasizes my need to disassemble. Through research I discover the parts that comprise the whole.

I struggle to accept the malevolence that is part of our world today—war, hunger, abuse, greed, the negative environmental impact the global community has on the planet—and question how I help and/or add to it. Though I am by no means an activist poet, if terror surfaces in my poems, I confront it. “Bus Ride to London” includes a narrative centered on the specifics of a bus ride to London, but contemplation gives rise to a pain present in the poem. Even along idyllic roadsides

terrible things thrive. For instance, when I see horses grazing and a home beaming with light from the windows, I remember that on a previous trip a friend told me that along the roadside a serial killer once dumped the bodies of children he killed. I don't like ending the poem with the remembrance of a serial killer, but I listen to what insists on being in the poem regardless of whether I like it because I trust that I will realize its significance in time. I try anything with the poem; I seldom cast away an idea as something I won't try.

I lean on Blake. In *Songs of Experience*, he asks the tiger: "Did he who make the lamb make thee?" Though the lamb and the tiger differ greatly, they are both of this world and reflective of the contrariness of the human experience. "The Last West African Black Rhino" functions as a response to the extinction of the West African black rhinoceros. After discovering the extinction of this species of rhinoceros, I had an emotional response to the state of the environment. How oddly distancing, too, to know that the extinction of this species would have little immediate impact on my life, yet I didn't want to accept the rhino's extinction; it didn't seem fair. I worked through this response in the poem, but I didn't want to give in to the gloomy and frustrated tone that came so easily to me. I took the voice of the rhinoceros and moved forward.

My manuscript incorporates varied free verse forms and modes of address. These poems are maps of thoughts. In this way, they might be called lyric poems. Drury writes that "music predominates over story" in the lyric poem. Connections made in these poems are not necessarily linearly or narratively based, but rather are based on commonly shared and personal associations, or on my relationship to language. I let the poem show me where it needs to go. In "Watching Ashbery via Live Stream," I use interruption and reveal uncertainties to disclose my thoughts: "In the basement. / No. It only seems like one / Dark and clammy, but where the lamp / Lights the soft corners of people." At times the contemplation insists so heavily as to become more

meditative. “Departing London” consists of a series of contemplations: visual art, a train ride, then remembering my friend, Maria.

As I write, I try not to filter material from my own experience that I might be afraid to encounter. Forthrightness guides me through my work to non-judgment and acceptance. “Marriage II” explores a subject I am unsure about, but that I perceive as movement into awareness. The awareness of and confrontation with the self encourages me to reflect, and I hope become a better human being in the world, a better friend, a better community member. I’m drawn to writing because I want to be a more compassionate person, and I think the work that writing requires helps me on that journey. Anne Lamott says that “this business of becoming conscious, of being a writer, is ultimately about asking yourself, how alive am I willing to be.” The more I write, the more I allow myself to see beyond the surface, beyond my initial reaction to an experience or narrative. As I grow as a writer and send poems into the world, I hope that they might reach one reader who can better articulate an experience or find compassion because of a new understanding found in my poems. Writing and reading require reflection. Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “The Bean Eaters” effects me in this way. Brooks describes an old, seemingly poor couple and the small gestures they make through the day: “Two who have lived their day, / But keep on putting on their clothes.” The poem reveals the lives of an elderly couple (be they real or imagined) and inspires thoughts and compassion for others in the world. In “Said, *let me talk plainly*,” I begin untangling the significance of writing mentors, specifically in this poem, my undergraduate professor. In “Friends,” I explore with a friend the aftermath of death. There’s a realization of the impermanence of life, and the urge to connect with each other as genuinely as possible. The impermanence of life pervades my poems in a direct way, and also through the presence of flowers. I love flowers. Fresh cut flowers are one of the luxuries I allow myself on occasion. Flowers signify beauty, fertility, death, and the life cycle, and I use them in my poems to

this purpose. There's a metaphorical thread of humanity in flowers: certain situations are optimal for blossoming, and even dried flowers are beautiful, though ragged. "Never a Loss" contains a reference to dried flowers. The flowers in the poem are dead, but they have taken to death with care, much like the way a difficult situation with a friend can lead to a foundation for boundless joy.

Looking ahead, I see my work involving voices other than my own. At present, several poems incorporate that: "Friends," "You, nearly a ghost," "After Reading Elizabeth Bishop's Letters." Though seeded in my preoccupations, this inclination was encouraged by Michael Tod Edgerton's recent visit to UNO's campus and my discovery of his project "what most vividly," wherein he reaches out to community members with questions, then adapts their responses into his own poetry. In an interview with Christopher Hennessy for the Sept./Oct. 2013 issue of the *American Poetry Review*, poet Kazim Ali puts it eloquently: "We dream ourselves closer, hope poetry and art can bring us together, [can bring us] to [a place of] empathy: to feel and understand what another is feeling and thinking. Violence, expressions of power, exploitation of another's person, land, resources or labor—all of these things become impossible when we realize the close intimacy of being between individuals." There's a selfishness involved in the poetic "I"; breaking from my own voice may drive me to connect with others in a compassionate way. Structural changes often parallel changes in content; hybrid forms may prove helpful when including several voices to produce a layering effect. This past semester, while working on my thesis I considered the overlaps of subject matter between my poems and creative nonfiction essays. With these overlaps, new forms and new material emerge.

Process itself keeps me writing: the physicality of the pencil, the research, the reflection, the opportunity for discovery. I relate my work ethic to what Donald Hall writes *Life Work*: "It is

the family farm—that which historians of work’s structure derive from utter antiquity—that provides a model for my own work; one task after another, all day all year, and every task different” (11). Each day I find my way into writing, each day it’s a little different: one day it involves scratching through the pencil markings on my drafts, another day perusing Wikipedia, learning the technical terms for algae on fish, another day letting the ideas swell in my thoughts while I go for a walk in search of the poem’s rhythm.





*Schwimmender Kopf* (Swimming Head)

There are ghosts beneath these rocks  
I'm turning

Surfaces I never anticipated.  
On the body of a sunfish, algae

Blossoms replace scales.  
Paint patterns pandemonium—

See how much accumulates?  
Consider it a map. I mark:

Marbled slick, pointed cliffs,  
The marsh, low-lying, where silhouettes

Branch gracefully—how little  
Time it takes to despair.

The swell of pink spilt paint  
Swallows me. It looks like this:

I am a jellyfish taken by the sea.  
The spilt pink is it.

Hair trailing tentacles. I am  
Spent charcoal and rust. I swim through

House paint and resin, navigating  
Oil and water. I

Buckle. I crack. I  
Bleed.

Each of us alone  
What we are longing as one.

Look closely, an aggregate of purple-black  
A blackberry makes.

Swim in my gritty sounds dirty.  
It looks like this:

Submerged most of life  
I am the bone of this song.

Watch, I can move in a sculling motion.  
This head alone.

## Marriage I

On the bathroom rug, his wet footprints  
silhouette an archipelago.

Across the couch, his arm  
slumps over my clavicle.  
His hand cups shoulder  
ball and socket.

In photographs he stands beside me  
clutching half my rib cage  
in his embrace, a palmful of lung.

He imbeds in brain patterns,  
basal ganglia, initiates a rhythm  
that tries to stick.

But I am in his throat  
as his knee bears into my thigh.

Out of me he pulls a ghost  
and it's one I can't not see.

His fingers in my hair.  
My fingers

## Meditation in Late Hours on Alberto Giacometti

Nights your potted eyes grow heavy on my face: shoal of reddened clay.

Paris lights don't deny spiders underground tunnels.

Nor lovers and cataphiles the deftness of your touch.

Half the time you are out for coffee: *suis au café tabac*.

The other half: flirtatious conversations bleed through brick walls, continue in unsent letters.

Your endless coquetry. Did she know you made a ritual of it?

It has me swollen in sleep, decorating a past.

At 4 AM I rise, make my rounds, knot a thread to my wrist as a reminder.

The things that make up dreams: fluffed pillows and iodine, radio waves and ionospheres, red walls and framed maps. Fractals of thought on the faces of great thinkers, each framed and hung in a row.

From your sullen lover's mouth, paint dribbles, melting her warm flesh.

## Lettered Olive

*My brother gave me a lettered olive seashell; he said on it I could read the way of my life.*

Physicality: A solid, elongated, nearly straight-sided shell with an elevated spire fits in a deeply channeled suture of my palm. Remark: taken as a prayer of certain passage. Occurrence: We visit the living. We visit the dead, too. The columella folds several times along its length; columellar callus continues downward opens a chasm from where an oak tree grows extending into your backyard. Remark: It was November. I wore a scarf. Bayou followed me down the drive. Chroma: Pale brown fringed with yellow. Dark brown streaks and two zigzags mirror the sunlight sketched across your kitchen floor. Bayou, a speckled coat of white. Remark: The name stems from the fancied resemblance of the markings to the letters of the alphabet. Habitat: Intertidal sand.

## The Last West African Black Rhino

The sunset of old  
distills cetacean intelligence,  
silhouettes his broad back  
dotted with white egrets  
nibbling mites in the folds  
of his armored skin.

—

Is virility always about survival?

I've fallen into the stages—  
*conservation dependent, critically endangered.*  
Since I've become the headlines  
the plaque of my exhibit has been upgraded  
to something showy, a bigger frame,  
an ornate carving of a crash of rhinos.

Is this the path we've fallen into, extinction?

Have I become my own depression?  
A supposed patriarch, yet I feel a floozy.  
I am the stone of a fruit  
and I am past my aging.

I even lost my way  
last night as the orangutans swung  
overhead, belly-flopping  
in my watering hole.

This happened at 2:57 a.m.  
The rangers will never find out.

## Vivarium of a Heart from Childhood Shared

From our parents' garage, you pulled the round wooden table, the small chairs. You collected empty terrariums, toy horses, one looking just like Greta, and lined them up in their stalls. There was a game of Chinese Checkers, the one we played on the floor of your room. There was a TV and VCR small enough to rest atop a white pedestal. I'm not surprised to think of your dogs walking through the art-watchers, or slumping by the furnace you drew in charcoal on the wall next to which you placed iron fire-tending tools. The real and imagined are inseparable. You strung a garden hose across the largest white wall; it dipped and stretched high to where it rested on a hook, then slumped to a coil by the baseboard. We were playing games. We were writing on the walls. We were stirring berries into mud soup, climbing to the highest branches (you), and preserving the bodies of dead animals (you). This time there's roadkill in a cage where we once kept a pet rabbit, like its animal spirit. One day you gave me a miniature fox I put in my pocket. You said it might be something like your animal spirit. Mine would have the features of a whale—bulbous and slow-moving, meditative and with an innate determination to swim across oceans. She would take flight, but through water. Think claw and order, red on red feathered. Not knowing herself a goddess and perhaps only one to me, she would course through life content along each continent repeating to herself: *breathing is important to survival, a promise kept is brighter than gold.*

## Exit Into

Along the coast all I found were exits.  
Exits from the ocean into the sea  
a river of exits, sluggish and brown.  
I water my plants and all that grows is exits.  
I study Cornell's boxes as smaller exits: green bird  
spool of thread, constellations.  
Other people's exits: a marriage worth leaving, death  
of a father, child from the womb.  
From one highway to the next  
we are in a state of exits.  
Through Alabama: King of Biscuits  
and a live circus. In fields of corn  
a cluster of them. I exit long days  
with fish in my hand. From cracked mortar  
two spiders come out. It's getting late.  
(Exit fear of losing.)  
I bow and take mine into the sea.



## Study in Perspective on South Beach

Winds break waves blue-white crashing. No, aqua, a translucent aqua, like cellophane. The sea made of cellophane. Hanging over the horizon, the sun: everything flat. Sun-bathers, boats, planes grow smaller as they leave me. Let's take the boat on the edge, two more boats today than yesterday. They are just as small. Heavy boots worn by men working on the boat, even smaller, I'm thinking the size of my pinky fingernail. I'm thinking of their skin, leathered. Their hands, calloused. Their shirts, thin cotton. What are they doing out there? Fishing? It can't be rigging—there are too many people swimming. I tell myself they are looking after the waters even though I know it isn't true. I know the boats are heavy as war ships, but from here they don't look that way. One day when I looked at the boat, it looked like a prisoner in isolation. Yes, yes, they are looking after the waters. Mixing the perfect blue, sending the waves to shore. Not men, no. These are women on this boat. What was I thinking? These women staring into the sun flat sun. The huge thing, the boat, is it on her back? These shells, this sand, these are her jewels. The waves, her billowy pants.

## After Reading Elizabeth Bishop's Letters

Standing in the doorway of your house in Brazil  
framed in foliage *big leaves, little leaves and giant leaves*  
and waited on by birds *perching beaks agape*,  
you told me I was the one morning abandons.  
With a laugh as if it did the same to you.

In reveries I tell you how I've fallen through the stages:  
I stopped writing poems, I started writing poems.

You said something softly about horses:  
how the *so-so-so* soothes them, soothes me  
and even the loss of my alphabet seems trivial  
becoming only a minor catastrophe that runs  
across the bottom of the television at night  
for no one but me to see.

Ouro Preto, Brazil:  
Your hairs thread with the veins of leaves.  
A pillow still sunken with the indent of your head.  
Rippling reflections in a pool where you used to swim.  
It swells without you.

*Living* is this. The clouds spread.  
Their thickness grows thin  
for the ease of birds when they  
fly south for the winter, Elizabeth.  
Unbridle it all.  
Never retreating,  
not unfamiliar,  
corresponding, nevertheless.

## You, Nearly a Ghost

naked in the corner of a room  
the paint peels as if from my skin.  
You blend into a wall of silence, say  
*I don't want to read, dram, talk, or see tonight.*  
*I hope this doesn't last long.* Francesca Woodman,  
for a moment I couldn't remember your name  
I only saw a bird in fragmented flight  
and you, crouching in a dress  
tattered and ribboned—self-portrait  
in black and white film.

You I dress in the warmth of summer's plums,  
the "nun's thighs" of Italy, overlapping  
the purple of figs. Then it's fennel  
blossoming all over again. Across a wall  
of mirrors you danced *feminine in the pink*  
*and lacy fashion.* You and me *I wish*  
*I didn't waste my patience so endlessly.*

The puzzle pieces between us surface  
in a bowl of cereal, cracked egg,  
my own ponytail. I am with you  
writhing in a floral bed, lying flat  
and naked on tile floor.

We do not wish to invade sea and sky  
but poised as caryatids we bear  
we sculpt something from nothing.

Curled naked in the sod, I tell you  
take my hand. I give you the blue of this hour,  
one you can swim in, the robin resting in the night  
the leaves just before turning.



## The Hat Lady Equation

### I. Ladies' Brunch

Mother said the flounced frock looked more like a brunch dress  
born of the dewiness of mid-March, mid-morning  
when yellow tulips open in a glass vase.

At the Court of Two Sisters all legs crossed  
beneath a round table. The room lit by refracting  
diamonds depicted seven separate lives.

This girl had learned it's better to be coy  
than to ask for things. I'd practiced  
while brushing my teeth that morning.  
Then the hall of mirrors engulfed me.

With April came the thought of dead  
and tarnished, the lost luster of a tulip.  
Never it sank, the changeless thought.  
And to anyone who tricks a dayworker  
and by awful coda, *pourquoi voudriez-vous?*

### II. With Maria

On the night in which I and she (she and she)  
together eat a nine dollar sandwich: it was duck confit.

She cast a sly glance. She pretended to be coy.  
We practiced while braiding our hair in the mirror.  
She took a chance on a sandwich-maker.  
Oh, everybody wants everything!  
(gluttony of duck confit)  
And here coldness of water helps.

One thousand years of gods and demons  
owned by Arthropods—we learned to identify  
compound eyes, and yes and still  
*a writer we admired—*  
*the thought that she hadn't noticed,*  
*for she hadn't had the thought,* our whispers  
billowed. *Masquerade the ought to all-knowing.*  
Jah-jah-gah-ack.

### III. Imagining the Unsung of Fathers in View of Berryman at Sea

Fathers delivering philosophies with martinis and Mussolinis:  
it is intolerably painful, exultingly patriotic. Patriarchally: a word  
beneath which histories gather, wait.

Any artist and not a saint, stand with me,  
and in choral incantations sing of shedding  
light when finding *free from longing* in view of lovers.  
Aboard a French liner Berryman delights one kind, beautiful figure  
offering the rosiest cheeks (I am)  
always in danger of turning to ashes.

Where is the starling and when her song?  
Do I tell her this time, this time,  
this time I will listen better?  
Most days I wish to be less about me.  
Check the map, walk the distance.  
I stand ankle deep in the Mississippi  
pants rolled-up. Torn boots lie sunken in muck.  
The carnival lights silhouette two lovers pinned.

### IV. The Ending

What is the cost I see you wear?  
Is it enough to endure this history?  
Sacrificed bodies in shrouds of Dutch tulips  
awaken a stilted blue of garnished fame.  
Can we bear it?

*Get along you. He talkin' so good  
in rum drenched revelry an' beard  
appears a connoisseur of certainty.*

This figure's absence in the end I know.

## Symmetry of a Purge

I've lost my head again, forgive.  
Half the time it's poison I mop up

Scarring like glaciers  
Dredged through a canal

Of muck and sand. I still think I am  
The rise of sun to one.

Of fish, its stillness coats my pores.  
In decay, paint. Catch the light and I blush.

If it is symmetry, (one I can't break),  
Tomorrow will bring potted Paperwhites—

Mouths agape, as though telling.  
Tell me—

A red wool sweater, bleeding pomegranates,  
Brass rings encrypted with a truth:

Is it the small ones who purge themselves the most,  
Pinned in a rough of rust and spent coffee?

Conflagration  
And the stuff that enters a soul.

Stuff it with cotton through the mouth.  
An empty taxidermy and small.

Press my cheek against the wet body.

## Marriage II

'That day so tired. I,  
depressed ad over-fed  
like the seal in a zoo  
performing tricks every hour.

left flipper to the crowd  
nose to red ball  
catch fish in mouth  
diving into blue—

how many times a day  
confined by the same walls?

Sometimes I think I  
struggle just to see  
you care for me.  
'That isn't to say I  
don't otherwise feel  
love, just that no one  
ever looked to heal.



## Give Me Garden

Pinkets petals,  
    green cascading to swallow me  
        in sweet pollen as punch yellow.

Stitch me in the stripes of a bumble bee

heart of a hummingbird,  
    the quick of wings.

Photosynthesis and sunlight. Squeeze of citrus  
and the touch of gardenia on my nose.  
Raise my heart to beating.

    An armful  
of bagatelles and a place in the sun.  
    In the sun sarsaparilla. In spring in my step

the Mississippi and a sprig of jasmine.

Dirt between my toes, darkest.

    Tomorrow  
    the day after.

I give you this handful of thrushes.

*Joe Harper's Fort Across the River*

Where is this Joe Harper  
now absent from the scene?  
I imagine the lad of Twain's books  
dressed as a pirate, building campfires,  
rafting down the Mississippi.

If he is followed by a wolf  
I can tell you that the wolf  
and he are friends knowing  
years of sky and muddied waters.

The composition is ordinary, yet  
hues of earth resound  
drawing me into dappled light  
and heavy shadows.  
Or is it a place to crawl into,  
a child's fort, one I've built  
when we're dreaming of light  
with the stars as our cover?

Canvas is worked and re-worked.  
Forts fold back into the earth.  
The painter Tom Sawyer  
the poet Huck Finn.

## We Diagram a Ballet

in conversation: coffee grounds  
and resin, oil and water.  
Paint.

Please *catch fire, draw flame*.

On Conti Street  
swollen fish in cloudy  
water draw flies.

An itch spreads across infinite cells  
asks if this body crawls with them, *diptera*.  
Wings like fins, animate body.

Heat bubbles the surfaces of speech—  
clouds choking, longer, still.  
In a room full of people

please ray-finned fish,  
please uncollapse.

## Friends

I want to be able to say exactly how it looks: You are having a cup of coffee.  
The mug is white except for stains around the rim.

There's a slowness summer requires of us. Your day I see in Polaroids:  
in the oven, grapefruit cake bakes to tart pink the hue of azaleas—  
that boisterous bush by the front door, on the table—branchy green, white cloth,  
in the hallway your red pointed shoes reflect in the mirror.

Eight years of letters in a cigar box. A sweep of leaves in fall.

You write, you like to think I'm always baking, rising early.

I am where mimosa trees wave sprightly pink and yellow blossoms, beckon quiet  
like the Persian silk the are named after. Sit with me beneath the trees  
counting cards in gin rummy, counting cups of coffee like we used to until anything left unsaid  
evaporates in the sun.

## Of the Sun in Things

I

In the garden the sun's work is beyond me.

But when I break,

I see green or red

leaves and a berry.

II

I let the wind wash me over.

The kale

III

furls dark purples.

My ghost

draws a class from the cupboard.

Seven wildflowers in a bundle,

nine lives I will

moonlight or lamp—

I have

the sun in her fingertips.

## Bus Ride to London

Clock towers. The snow white  
glow across green patched countryside.  
Buildings dark with age sprout  
trees from their chimneys.

Ivy and moss, stone walls,  
winding roads. Birds dash  
across morning's stillness.  
Window left open. White clouds lie thick.

We make stops along the way,  
one at Morrisson when a couple sits  
in front of me. I listen to place his accent.  
Into the phone, what does he say?

The driver stands facing the passengers  
points to exits. *We'll be stopping in East Midlands,*  
a small station near a nuclear plant,  
to transfer to a train. I will swallow

any desolation to make it right.  
A myth of absolute safety:  
if we lose the trees,  
if we lose in the fog  
the steeple, a manicured tree

fanned out like coral  
and flattened against the horizon  
the skeletal remains of something precious.

We pass a field of poppies, their brittle  
bodies stick straight up, thin stalks  
tipped with little knobs, dried now.  
*Where a killer once dumped tortured bodies*

said to me on the way home from a trip in February.  
I see horses grazing. I see the rusted truck  
and house, beaming through the windows.

## In Light of Giacometti's Death

I wanted to carry his remnants in an orange cigar box across Swiss meadow and by frozen lake. For days a purgatory of things undone pecked shamelessly. A statement I repeated about love was the same, mostly planting a history that followed like a dog, tail wagging. 1920 and a part of him died in the gray light of the French Alps. Light reflected blue from tiled rooftops, swelled the skyline, saw death on the cold face of Dutchman Peter van Meurs—a death he wore until his own. At his funeral, lovers and brothers strewn across by the shadows that day clung to limbs, stuffed clouds into bruised hearts. Stampa filled with snow and valley. His remnants: ghosts piled cold in clay, only blank spaces in portraits of lovers. A nest spun of affairs solidified as from it his body fell, emptied of daylight. *Palace at 4 a.m.* wears a black gown. In her hand she strokes midnight's creature who flies once through three panes of time, three empires of time undone in the window frame as suspended in air one caged spinal column hangs.

## In Which I Dismantle My Body

'Touch the arms, flush  
against the sides of the body,  
a parabola opens in the gap.  
Small arches of a skeleton  
mirror the curve of ribs  
surface and shadow.

This body in a bed of magnolia leaves  
Husband by my side counts the blossoms  
names each one aloud.

It's been the same for years.  
So then the body dies.  
I braid the hair, dismantle  
the bones by joint, identify each.  
Each I give a name,  
line them up row-by-row  
in descending order by the water's edge.  
I don't know which body of water.

Each time I'm braiding the hair  
arranging the bones  
against dark earth.  
The skin in decay,  
so acrid it's almost sweet.

The woods, the lichen and moss  
illuminate green in the sun. Thyme, too.  
The bellies of boulders surface, but still,  
does it matter which water?  
Or only that by the moon's will it rises  
swallowing by embrace?





## Becoming a Saint

After Pope Benedict XVI slid the rings from his fingers, draped his white simar over the bedside, and left his red shoes by the door. And after he'd caught a plane or train to what I imagined was a villa in the Swiss alps: lavender fields, fat lowing cattle, snow-capped mountains, but was really the Mater Ecclesiae, I thought I'd be Pope Poetess.

Over my head I'd slip the simar, shuffle my feet into his red shoes, stack the rings on my fingers. Prayers of the people accented by bells—each day I'd send these out before the birds. Poems would be groups of people, each a word or phrase, each newborn syllable—string them together as they walk the earth breaking in the garden to rearrange their syntax.

This job isn't for me, though. It's my friend who's on her way to sainthood. No one doubts her holiness. She writes and heals, writes and heals. Her golden locks tied in a knot atop her head are pure angel, pure Popess. She is a goddess of Rubenesque beauty. On her feast day, there's nothing but croissants and elderberry jam. In her five years of writing, two more miracles: cures for worrywarts and closed eyes. Only thing is—it's true—she has to die.

## Portrait of Hades as an Old Man

*Anthologies of half-silences and half-bodies,  
keepers of pocket cigarillos and deeper sighs,  
come sip tea at river's bed.  
Be greeted by children with painted faces  
reddened with enthusiasm.*

The mortician cossets a jar of historical moments.  
From a peasant's yellow past he harvests a posthumous offering.

Black poplars, petals drifting out of windows,  
down alleyways to the tune of toy pianos,  
Tartarus in the distance, crows in the tree tops  
departed spirits cling like leaves across an empty horizon.

The interior of black rock castle felt with fever.  
Hades exaggerates with age, counts the rings in his bones.  
His hands grasping an empty jar, the old god  
shuts his eyes while Panic sleeps in a porcelain tub.

All the years evading gods, hiding his stolen queen—  
he'd tracked them with notches on a rope.  
There was no room for error.  
“Enough of these minor catastrophes.”

One night in the hanging gardens  
cricket dangled his song: waltz for nothing, for waiting.  
It was taken as a valentine.

Three voices simmered overhead  
as gods returned from counting heads  
of those whipped fleshless by their own searing eyes.

No birds, only the sound of wings.

*Return coins to the pockets of those left behind.  
Return bodies to graves, line them up in a row  
arrange them together in a tea setting.*

## Scale History: Two Childhoods Remembered

In another past, it's something forced.  
Something unkind that spits across the paper.

Through a sensitive muck of flesh, I  
clear the layers. One deep incision

not as surgical, but as opening, one opening  
then, would it all fall away?

Leaving the body to protect the body

of a fish, scales on a fish  
on me.

If it's entering, won't it be love?

A stretch of white, red, and yellow erupts  
past the painting's edge. In it I see

two taking tea, blue from white striped napkins  
or the game we used to play in the pool.

I lap it up. A thin flare of white  
extends from the mass

catches the light. I draw it out.  
See, now it's all shiny?

Hold it close.

### Marriage III

I almost always appear more comfortable than I am.  
It's my own fault. Something about water's surface—

Paintings on the wall: don't let them tire. And not the ivy  
dripping. On the bad days cast brighter every time.

Love even in death  
(naïve to think death rotten).

Sacred: Papa tall  
behind the bar in their living room,  
the port lantern gleaming.  
In his hand a liter of 7-Up  
and two highball glasses—  
one for him, one for Lola.  
Nothing was ever too much trouble  
with him, nothing could help but grow.

Check before putting clothes in the dryer.  
Shelve your books together. The ones that don't fit, stack on the mantle.  
Cook and eat together: linen napkins, fancy dishes, clink glasses.

Departing London via East Midlands Trains  
After Visiting the Tate

In the Agnes Martin room, white  
walls wear tall canvases  
the way the slacked elbows of a jacket sleeve  
wear rectangular patches. Pastel  
lines tender silence  
and the child she spoke of in the snow  
rests in the joy experience  
of a four-story mountain.

We pass sweeping greens and spiny trees  
Barbed wire fences. Rows of hedges.

Fractured bodies spill.  
Francis Bacon shadows what's left after death.  
*Triptych, August 1972* swells of a dead lover. Beside it hangs . . .  
was it *Study for Portrait on Folding Bed*? I imagine the painter  
drink in one hand, torn up over the foreground,  
the composition, he thinks, left askew, or perhaps too balanced.

Skirting through towns, over tired bridges.

How is it that memories pleat in the mind  
as folds of an envelope do when I write to you, Maria?

I ate a sandwich: ham, brie, arugula  
turned pages of Rodin's penciled bodies.  
Exposed, the body's lines gestured  
along infinite curved paths: bend, then swallow  
space, ask for it. I am down a cobbled road.  
We are across oceans  
leaving our tracks behind us,

In the haziness I am Turner—  
his expanding landscapes, small figures, heaving trains.

## Never a Loss

In a cathedral of trees, I reveal our history  
of fallen apples, arrange them with dried flowers.  
Brambles clustered along the water.  
Ground cover frosted over. Weeping willows.

If not for you, I'd never have known this place  
this *our* crossing.  
In dusk hours misshaped by ice, we laughed  
over burnt bread loaves.

We opened a book of snow.  
Snow opened to  
the birds with their songs. Every morning.  
Every morning the birds with their songs.  
My tired song lit the color of oranges,  
pomegranate ovules.

## Watching Ashbery via Live Stream

In the basement.  
No. It only seems like one  
Dark and clammy, but where the lamp  
Lights the soft corners of people.  
Where I am,  
I grab a bag of Cheetos.  
Upholstery fades to soft. Behind him  
Colored spines and lost titles  
I squint to recognize.  
I imagine a round table covered in newspapers,  
The funnies, even though I almost wrote *obituaries*.  
His breath amplifies in the mic.  
He seems relaxed  
If not for difficult breathing.  
He reads his poems.  
They are his childhood stories.  
They flutter from his lips  
The way my dad tells of quicksand, charging bulls,  
The goat in the tree.  
He delights in their antics, rounds every "O."  
Like sex between older bodies:  
To know every freckle  
Every fold of skin. It is enough to lick  
The cheese from my fingers. It is enough to find this.  
When Ashbery describes a line too little understood  
I know the ones who will laugh with me.  
I am what grows beneath a basement floor.



## As If the Geese Struck the Plane

New York and the glare of lights,  
pedestrian crosswalks, floods  
of people in crosswalks,  
I think

as Mom shuffles  
an English muffin on the foil,  
oven left open now. She reads  
Frued, the psychosexual stages,  
says she's stuck in oral, envious  
from truncated nursing at one and a half.  
I sit at my desk, draw  
skinny pine trees in black ink,  
think of Sullenberger's plane that went down, imagine a cloud  
of mayflies arising from the wreckage  
as the passengers float on Styrofoam wings.  
And the polyps  
blossom beneath,  
red now to orange,  
while the legs cold and busy,  
kick and lose their shoes in the Hudson.

Said, *let me talk plainly*

I wonder if I have the right to call on you  
and so early in the morning  
when spirits turn once in their sleep  
after the thought of losing someone.  
Even the suggestion of tragedy can be lonesome  
with the push of a thousand hands at my back.  
I was never ready to leave you.

Twenty children and six adults shot at school.  
And how just days before, I'd written to you  
about laughter and sewn wedding favors  
later felt gutted. There were three poems  
and how you called on Lorca  
in sleeplessness, sat to write.

You I imagine on a farm in Connecticut.  
A rooster crows, but you're already awake.  
The tomato plants are not overcrowded.  
Your boys' voices fill the house, giving space  
for gratitude intersecting, then again.

## Goat

On cold waters  
by brown and stone and pine,  
with clouds of the thickest sky  
or a wind shifting the fog  
below the moon and swelling  
sea's black coat,

when till the loon  
dives and feeds  
from the shadowed surface  
where it propels  
the fog weighing in,  
the fog ever with coils;

when, moistened white,  
always the shore widens  
stretches white fog,  
or braids the stone's  
gray with red leaves  
from deciduous trees;

after white, intersecting ripples,  
over shallows through branches,  
into browning hillsides  
and coarse, browning hay,  
round, large as boulders,  
near shaded moss-covered homes,

through dusting mist  
the milkmaid advances sanguinely,  
the apron hanging ribbons,  
ribbons striped with red,  
fluttering the bright lines  
of ivory, cotton linen;

over bridges, through puddles,  
and crouches, steady, when  
the spotted dog licks  
hand and nuzzles  
four nudges  
while the cows low.

Blessings from the cicadas,  
to the birds, to the cows.

The milkmaid milks. The milk  
drips thin a thread,  
trickling, constant, white,  
splashes puddling in.

Its warm, thick fat  
congeals and separates and rises,  
amid the cold morning's air,  
in deep wooden buckets,  
after the buckets  
and hands like muzzles;

the teats quiver  
with her tugging  
through tender morning;  
chickens cluck  
around the farm,  
and light opens.

Three birds with songs.  
About the sun—  
ordinary, ghost, humming;  
all plasma, sifted white,  
then clouds clutter the horizon  
in strata.

A lush peony. Wilted.  
The hillside  
with thyme in patches.  
The wild flowers wither  
and the morning bees visit  
yet hardly fly alone.

Across the road, a white goat  
munches grass:  
a girl's first friend.  
Two soft ears perk,  
curious, cautious.  
The cow opens one eye.

A man turns over  
in one waking stretch,  
cocooned, gray, yawning.  
"A cool morning. Indeed, Lord,  
frosted the tips of grass."  
He faces her next.

Red while she walks

the pebbled path,  
winding, shaded, browning;  
red when leaves fall  
on her as goats root  
through dark before a rising.

## Notes

“*Schwimmender Kopf*,” “We Diagram a Ballet,” and “Scale History: Two Childhoods Remembered” were influenced by *Please Be Quiet, Please*, a series of paintings by Chris Dennis: The paintings are characterized by a highly detailed drawing of a fish head from which spews an abstract spill of sand, dirt, coffee grounds, spent charcoal, rust, house paint, enamel, furniture varnish and resin.

“Vivarium of a Heart from Childhood Shared” was written after *Ghosts of the Quarry*, an installation by Blaine Capone, my brother.

“*Joe Harper’s Fort Across the River*” was written after a painting by James Taylor Bonds.

“Friends” is for Nina.

“Of the Sun in Things” I wrote after Wallace Stevens’ “Of the Surface of Things.”

“Departing London via East Midlands Trains” is for Maria.

“Said, *let me talk plainly*” is for Carol Ann Davis.

“Goat” I wrote after Elizabeth Bishop.

Vita

Lauren Capone earned her undergraduate degree from the College of Charleston in 2009. She hopes to earn her MFA from the University of New Orleans in May 2014. She lives in New Orleans.